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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life and works of Meridel LeSueur, a colleague of Kenneth Burke, and herself a radical writer during the 1920s and 1930s. The paper states that LeSueur's primary aim was to establish an indigenous working-class culture to support working-class action. It notes that her arguments about writing build upon the rhetorical foundation of her mother, Marian Wharton LeSueur, and first appeared in the "New Masses," a magazine written by and for radical members of the American middle class. The paper then traces her development as a socialist intellectual, and discusses her many articles on writing. In 1939, according to the paper, Meridel LeSueur shifted audiences, and instead of speaking to practicing writers, she wrote a manual for the students she was teaching in the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The paper reports that in 1995, when Meridel was 95 and bedridden, she admitted to still being in the Communist Party, and she articulated the essence of her rhetorical stance: "The difference between a bourgeois writer and a working-class writer is knowing what you are looking at--the bourgeois writer doesn't have an attitude towards what he sees--he doesn't see how it relates to other things and events." (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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# "We Must Have Writers": An Introduction to the Narrative Rhetorical Theory of Meridel leSueur.

by Julia M. Allen

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**"We Must Have Writers":**

**An Introduction to the Narrative Rhetorical Theory of Meridel LeSueur**

Deborah LeSueur told me that I should abandon academic convention and refer to Meridel LeSueur by her first name. She said otherwise this sounds much too distanced. I decided to compromise, so most of the time, I use her first name.

In May of 1935, Kenneth Burke and Meridel LeSueur shared the stage at the first American Writers' Congress in New York, a gathering of radical writers strongly influenced by the U.S. Communist Party, of which both LeSueur and Burke were members. The speeches of Burke and LeSueur are very different, however. Burke argues that the left should abandon the word "workers" as an organizing term and substitute the word "people." He claims that "one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values—just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into saints." The term also "contains the *ideal*," he claims, "the ultimate *classless* feature which the revolution would bring about". (Hart 90).

History proved Burke to be correct in one respect: within weeks the movement had adopted the term Popular Front in order to gain broader support in the international fight against fascism. However, his argument that working-class people must be reached through features of bourgeois culture is not one that Meridel would have supported. Nor would she have wanted to try to articulate "the ideal." Her primary aim was quite the opposite: to establish an indigenous working-class culture to support working-class action. "It is from the working class," she told the Congress,

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> that the use and function of native language is slowly being built in such books as those of James Farrell with the composition and the colloquialism of the streets of Chicago; of Jack Conroy with his worker heroes going from the automobile industry in Detroit to the coal fields; of Nelson Algren, and of the worker-writers in the *Farmers' Weekly*, in the *Western Worker*. (136)

Meridel's arguments about writing first appear in the *New Masses*, a magazine written by and for radical members of the American middle class. Like many writers for the *New Masses*, Meridel was a member of a John Reed club, an organization established in 1930, with branches across the country, that was devoted to promoting radical cultural work. When that organization was broadened in 1935 into the American Writers' League, Meridel was one of those who signed the call for the first American Writers' Congress, held in New York in May of that year. She also was a member of the presiding committee of the Congress, was one of the main speakers, and at the close of the conference was appointed to the national council of the organization. In addition to writing and publishing herself, Meridel taught writing to members of the Workers' Alliance, worked as a paid teacher for the WPA, and offered private writing classes.

Meridel's arguments about writing build on the rhetorical foundation established by her mother, Marian Wharton LeSueur, author of *Plain English*, a writing textbook for Socialists enrolled in The People's College of Fort Scott, Kansas in 1915. This foundation was constructed from anti-capitalist and democratic principles, as well as from a realization of the organic necessity of change. Both Marian LeSueur and Meridel saw language as a tool created and constantly being modified by those who use it. Access to language, they argued,

unlike other forms of capital, was therefore freely available to everyone. Because we live in a constructed world, both also placed those who do the work at the center, not the periphery, of knowledge.[1]

Beyond this, however, the similarities end (and apparently the dinnertable arguments began). When Meridel LeSueur began writing during the 1920s, times had changed. The Socialist Party had been decimated during the war, the world now had a proletarian state in the Soviet Union, and Meridel had joined the Communist Party. She had read Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and had also explored the work of James Frazier, D.H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud. Meridel's commentaries on writing are part of a conversation initiated by Michael Gold in an article on proletarian art in 1920 and expanded in a 1930 article on proletarian realism. This conversation was carried on first within the John Reed Clubs and then within the American Writers' League, among other places. Other elements of the conversation on which Meridel drew include Engels' and Lenin's works on dialectics and the statements issued by the Kharkov Conference, an international gathering of revolutionary writers held in the Soviet Union in November of 1930.

A key passage for Meridel is Engels' explanation of dialectical materialism in *Anti-Duhring*. Using metaphors of seeds and heat, Engels says:

> Let us take a grain of barley. Millions of such kernels are ground, boiled and brewed, and then consumed. But if such a barley-corn encounter the conditions normal for its development, if it fall upon favorable soil, the

[1] For more on Marian Wharton LeSueur, see Julia M. Allen, "'Dear Comrade': Marian Wharton of The People's College, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1914-1917. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 11.1-2 (1994): 119-133. See also Jane Greer "'No Smiling Madonna': Marian Wharton and the Struggle to Construct

> influence of the heat and of moisture will effect a peculiar transformation in this seed. It sprouts; the seed as such disappears, is negated, and in its place appears the plant, the negation of the seed. But what is the normal life course of the plant? It grows, blossoms, is fructified, and finally produces other grains of barley, and as soon as these have matured, the stalk withers and is negated in its turn. But the result of this negation of the negation is again the barley-grain with which we began, and not one grain merely, but an increase ten or twenty or thirty fold. (qtd. in Lenin 322)

She also attributed to Engels a statement that there are only two subjects for the writer: one was the moribund dying society, the corpse, she says he called it. The other was the new born, being born out of the corpse, the new people, the new consciousness. Meridel probably would have read *Anti-Duhring* in 1934, when it first was made available in the U.S. After that, organic growth in the form of seeds and birth became her central metaphors.

Meridel's first public statement on writing appeared in the *New Masses* in the February 26, 1935 issue. Entitled "The Fetish of Being Outside," it was a response to an article published two weeks earlier by Horace Gregory a poet and one of the founders of the John Reed Clubs. In answering Gregory, Meridel draws on Michael Gold's list of elements of Proletarian Realism from the *New Masses* of September, 1930 and the statement of principles developed in the Kharkov Conference.

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a Critical Pedagogy for the Working Class, 1914-1917." *College Composition and Communication* 51.2 (1999): 248-271.

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Gregory begins by stating his allegiance to the Communist party, noting in particular that it is the first third party in American politics to offer a positive program and not merely an attack upon the existing parties. He goes on to state his position as a writer: that he wishes to maintain his status as an "outsider," so as to remain objective. He does not wish to be held responsible for economic theories, and he just cannot seem to escape his middle-class upbringing. Though he acknowledges that the country is "torn to fragments by individualism," his own article seems to be seeking the privileges of the middle-class individual (21).

Meridel notices this and begins her response by saying: "In times like these points of view are important; they represent what you will be called upon to act from tomorrow" ("Fetish" 199). The connection that she draws in this first line between belief or attitude and future action is one that she continued to draw throughout the rest of her life. She goes on to say that she finds "an act of full belief very difficult to the bourgeois mind." Yet this full belief, she says, this ability to envision a communal society, is the dialectical function of the writer. The writer must be able to "create from this belief the nucleus of a new condition and relationship of the individual and society" (199). She then points out that the whole notion of "joining," as Gregory has expressed it, is a spurious one. Groups in an exploiting world, she says, are merely an accretion of individuals, while "an organic group pertaining to growth of a new nucleus of society is a different thing" (199). You either belong or you don't, by virtue of your beliefs. And what's more, such beliefs represent "hard, difficult, organic growth away from old forms to entirely new ones" (199). It's not, she says, like joining the Rotarians.

Furthermore, she says, a failure to understand economics is no longer justifiable. "[T]his is the dynamic stuff of the composition of our time," she says (200). Then, recalling Engels' metaphor, Meridel responds to Gregory's statement that he cannot write in the heat of conflict by saying that no one expects him to—but "what we do demand is heat. You can't hatch anything without heat. Objective, removed individual writing at this time doesn't give birth to anything" (201). "The writer's action is full belief," she concludes, "from which follows a complete birth, not a fascistic abortion, but a creation of a new nucleus of a communal society in which at last the writer can act fully and not react equivocally, in a new and mature integrity" (203).

Meridel's argument draws particularly on point five of the statement from the Kharkov Conference, which asks writers "to struggle against the influence of middle class ideas" (Alexandre 67). It also addresses points two and three: "to fight against fascism, whether it was open or concealed, and to fight for the developing and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement" (67).

Sometime during 1935, Meridel also wrote a statement criticizing writing education, called "Formal 'Education' in Writing." Though written in 1935, this statement was not published until 1990, when John Crawford of West End Press added it to other previously published work in a new book, *Harvest Song*. In this statement, Meridel argues that "writing is primarily a sensuous and creative expression of life" while "[m]odern education...is an apology for the distortions of a competitive, dog-eat-dog system of life" ("Formal 'Education'" 208). Within the schools, she says, "theory takes the place of organic knowledge" (208). Most important, the schools—especially the universities—"bulwark against change" and prevent writers from a necessary contact with flux. "The University



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preserves with exquisite care the corpse of an old image whose spirit has long been dead," (208) she says. She also echoes Michael Gold's 1930 statement that "proletarian realism is never pointless. It does not believe in literature for its own sake, but in literature that is useful, has a social function" (209).

Meridel's speech at the American Writers' Congress in New York in May of 1935 was one of 28 published in a collection after the conference. Along with Kenneth Burke, other speakers included John Dos Passos, Granville Hicks, Louis Aragon, Malcolm Cowley, and Langston Hughes. Meridel begins with a statement about the land, a metaphor for the conditions necessary for growth: "The prairie of the Middle West is very large." She goes on to point out how this land has been ravaged by the greed of capitalists and how the work has been done by people for and about whom there is little culture. The land and railroad barons imported paintings and books and music from Europe. And yet, she says, there is the slow beginning of a culture. "The IWWs," she says, planted the seed of this culture, "and now it is here coming into growth" (Hart 137).

Drawing on another organic metaphor, she says: "At this time a new literature is being formed by a subtle event of birth. ...At the moment of hatching what is needed is heat....We need besides criticism, also love and enthusiasm, so that our literature will not be a dissected corpse before it is hatched" (138). In closing, she says that it is only a "united cultural front that can save us from falling into the last hypocrisy of the ruling classes—fascism" (138).

Later that day, at the end of the conference, Waldo Frank, secretary of the League of American Writers, responded to Meridel's implicit reference to dialectics in her metaphor of birth and made it explicit: "Meridel LeSueur" he says, "made a very fine point in her speech this morning. She spoke of this great

period of ferment, and the need of warmth. She used, I am glad to say, a word which I have used a great deal--the word 'organic'—organic experience" (189-90). Frank then creates his own dialectic, calling for discipline as well as ferment and warmth, and says that "it is precisely out of this furnace of contradictions, as it were, that the writer, if he really can hold himself to his clear views, creates the sort of hard, durable stuff of which his work—our creative work—must be born in order that it may live and that it may gain its end" (190).

In October of the same year, Meridel published an article on the short story in a magazine entitled *Manuscript News*. In this article she assesses the state of short story writing, saying that it is "marked by a curious somnambulance of style, geographic removal in space and time, a romantic evasion and psychic equivocation which seems to suggest that life is cruel and bitter and memory is literature" (n.p.). The way out of this impasse, she says, repeating the metaphor she has adapted from Engels, is "to believe again in gestation and birth and not in the decaying corpse marked by cynicism, futility and nostalgia which has marked bourgeois literature in a half century of its long death" (n.p.). The writer of the future, according to Meridel, "will directly transform and resuscitate our desires and our capacities again" ("Formal 'Education'" 209).

In 1939, Meridel shifted audiences, wanting to reach this writer of the future. Instead of speaking to practicing writers, she wrote a manual for the students she was teaching in the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This manual, edited and reprinted by John Crawford in 1982 as *Worker Writers*, differs from her other writing in that it is addressed specifically to working-class writers, not to middle-class writers. The problems clearly are different. Whereas writers such as Horace Gregory concerned

themselves with their own status as insiders or outsiders, the chief difficulty of the worker writer, Meridel points out, is simply finding the time and nerve to write. In addressing these writers, Meridel drew on the letters her mother had written to the students who had subscribed to her correspondence school text, *Plain English*. She speaks to her students directly, telling them that the language is theirs: they built it just as they have built the rest of America, and therefore it is theirs to use. Both Marian LeSueur and Meridel LeSueur encourage their students by creating an equation between tools and language. Meridel LeSueur says:

> The word, like the plow, the chisel, the needle, the spindle, is a tool. Of all the materials man works with the tool word is perhaps the most social. It is through the word that you speak to others, influence others, tell others what has happened to you. (n.p.)

"We must have writers," she said, because "America is finding out that the most vital song, poetry and literature, has long been produced by the worker building railroads over vast empires, hewing trees, plowing the prairie, planting the wheat....More and more we need words to write the true history of the past so that we may create a true history in the future (*Worker Writers* n.p.).

Meridel is following the cultural work directives of Michael Gold and the Kharkov Conference, aiming to establish a proletarian realism. The revolution will not be won seat by seat in elections, as the Socialists, including her mother, had envisioned before World War I, but will take place when the workers finally cohere sufficiently to take over the means of production, as they did in Russia in 1917. The stories of the workers are one part of the work to create this necessary coherence. "This kind of writing" she says, "is going to be simple and vivid

because we are going to read it before a group, because we want to share a rich, communal experience" (n.p.).

Emending this little textbook forty years later, in 1980, Meridel lists her objections to the current fads in bourgeois writing. The protagonist is small and ineffectual, she says, and the end result is defeat and destruction. Man's fate is beyond his control. What's worse, she says, is that "[t]here is a school even of ambiguity, whose purpose is to mean nothing or make the meaning so misted and roundabout it comes to nothing" (n.p.). Recalling her work of forty-five years earlier, she pleads: "We need a dynamic and dialectical structure. We not only want to describe the world, we want to change it." To this end, she calls for a narrative structure that will demonstrate the inherent contradiction in any given situation. A quantitative change in one element of that contradiction should develop to the point of a qualitative change or leap and hence lead to the resolution of the contradiction or new synthesis. All of her stories from the mid-1930s on are constructed in this manner. "Revolution," she says, "can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as wheat." (Hart 138).

In 1988, the text of one of Meridel's speeches was published in a magazine called *Cultural Democracy*. In this speech, entitled "They Want You to Perfume the Sewers," she revisits many of her old themes, but also celebrates what is new—global culture and resistance, and the realization by younger people that being paid to do art by the government is not a viable way to create change. "Those grants didn't work," Meridel says. "You didn't come in and perfume the sewers" (3). Instead, "the source of American culture lies in the historic movement of our people and the artist must become voice, messenger, organizer, awakener" (3).

In one of her last statements on writing, the afterword to the second edition of *Ripening*, a collection of her writings put together by The Feminist Press, Meridel worries that she has been in thrall to a patriarchal way of thinking. "Did I fall into the pit of romanticism, lyricism, the trough of pleasant, feminine conclusions?" she asks (290). Drawing once again upon dialectics, she asks her readers this time to provide the other element of the contradiction that will lead to a synthetic resolution:

> Perhaps women like me of another generation are a bridge. Pass over, use the energy of the root in our witness and our singing. So we will never be gone. You have more tools now..... Now we can find the revolutionary, revolving, and circular word, and the structure that leads to action and synthesis. (290-1)

When she was 95 and bedridden, Tim Wheeler, editor of the Communist Party's newspaper *The People's Weekly World*, interviewed Meridel and asked if she was still in the Communist Party. He reports that "Le Sueur fixed me with her dark, piercing, eyes. 'Prone -- but still in,' she replied." She also articulated the essence of her rhetorical stance: "The difference between a bourgeois writer and a working class writer," she said, "is knowing what you are looking at. The bourgeois writer doesn't have an attitude toward what he sees. He doesn't see how it relates to other things and events" (Wheeler).

Kenneth Burke and Meridel LeSueur shared the stage at the American Writers' Congress of 1935. At about that time, Burke reports that he advocated what he called a "red rhetoric," but party members didn't understand him and claimed that rhetoric was unnecessary, as the truth should be self-evident and

transparent (101).[2] Burke left the party and went on to develop a rhetoric that arguably does not have an attitude toward what it sees. Meridel, by contrast, drew on a combination of primary texts of the left, particularly the work of Engels, and the words of the working class. In this way, she fashioned, used, and taught a red rhetoric without explicitly naming it such. I come from a state that, among other things, has increased its prison population by 800% during the last twenty-three years ("Drug Offenders"). It seems to me that Meridel's rhetoric with an attitude deserves our renewed attention today.

[2] Burke actually says: "I once saw a Marxist (he has since left the Communist Party) get soundly rebuked by his comrades for the suggestion that leftist critics collaborate in a study of 'Red Rhetoric.' Despite their constant efforts to find the slogans, catchwords, and formulas that will most effectively influence action in given situations, and their friendliness to 'propaganda' or 'social significance' in art, they would not allow talk of a 'Red Rhetoric.' For them 'Rhetoric applied solely to the persuasiveness of capitalist, fascist, or other non-Marxist terminologies (or 'ideologies'). It seems clear that the "Marxist" in question is Burke himself.

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